

LOS ANGELES COUNTY POOR FARM, POWER PLANT COMPLEX
(Rancho Los Amigos, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Building Nos.
1300, 1301 & 1302)
(Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center)
(Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center)
7601 Imperial Highway; bounded by Esperanza Street, Erickson
Avenue, Descanso Street, and Hawthorn Street
Downey
Los Angeles County
California

HABS CA-2800-C
HABS CA-2800-C

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

LOS ANGELES COUNTY POOR FARM, HISTORIC POWER PLANT COMPLEX (Rancho Los Amigos, Los Angeles Building Nos. 1300, 1301, and 1302) Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center

HABS No. CA-2800-C

Location: 7601 Imperial Highway, located within the block bounded by Esperanza Street on the north, Erickson Avenue (formerly Main, Eucalyptus, and Horton Avenue¹) on the east, Descanso Street on the south, and Hawthorn Street on the west. The Historic Power Plant Complex faces east onto Erickson Avenue and south onto Descanso Street.

U.S. Geological Survey Los Angeles Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:
11S392626 N; 3754091 E (1909 Original Building & 1911 Addition)
11S392660 N; 3754084 E (1925 Power Plant)

**Present Owner /
Occupant:** County of Los Angeles

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: Constructed in three phases from 1909 to 1925, the Historic Power Plant Complex consists of the original 1909 steam plant (later, ice house and machine shop); the former laundry (the 1911 Addition to the 1909 Original Building); and the 1925 Power Plant building and its associated, freestanding Chimney. The Historic Power Plant Complex was opened as a component of the City of Downey's first electric light plant.² The building was located at the Los Angeles County Poor Farm and provided complete electricity to that institution. The County Poor Farm began in 1887/1888 as an agricultural facility that provided work, housing, and medical care for the indigent to relieve the overburdened Los Angeles County Hospital system. By the 1910s, an increasing number of inmates with chronic medical disorders were being admitted to the Poor Farm, causing a transition from providing rehabilitative, short-term treatment for the impoverished to a long-term patient care facility that eventually became the Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center. The Patient Ward Buildings were the first buildings constructed at the institution strictly to provide ward space for these chronically ill patients.

Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center is significant as an example of early twentieth century healthcare of Los Angeles County's indigent population

¹ Fliedner, Colleen Adair. 1990. *Centennial, Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center, 1888-1988*. Downey, CA: Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center, p. 105. According to Fliedner, "Early maps of the grounds often contradict each other on the exact dates the street names were changed" (p. 141). Earliest references to the street now known as Erickson call it Main; between 1925 and 1927, it became Eucalyptus; at an unknown date, Horton replaced Eucalyptus; and apparently sometime in the last quarter of the twentieth century, Erickson succeeded Horton.

² *Los Angeles Times*. 21 February 1909. "Looking for the light: Downey and County Farm ready to let it shine when it can be turned on," p. 110.

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and for its later treatment of those in Los Angeles County with chronic illnesses, both mental and physical. In 1995, seventy-six buildings located in the South Campus area of the former Poor Farm were determined eligible for listing as a historic district in the National Register of Historical Places, and as a result, the South Campus was automatically listed in the California Register of Historic Resources.³ The Historic Power Plant Complex was listed as a contributor to the Historic District.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. **Date of erection:** 1909 - 1925
2. **Architect:** No known architect could be associated with the Historic Power Plant Complex.
3. **Original and subsequent owners:** County of Los Angeles (1887/1888–present)
4. **Original and subsequent occupants:** County of Los Angeles (1887/1888–present)
5. **Builder, contractor, suppliers:** No known builder, contractor, or supplier could be associated with this building.
6. **Original plans and construction:** Original architectural drawings for the 1925 Power Plant Building are on file with the County of Los Angeles.
7. **Alterations and additions:** Alterations to the Historic Power Plant Complex include: the removal of original windows throughout the Complex; the replacement of original wood doors with metal doors throughout the Complex; the addition of a metal clad enclosure on the northwest corner of the 1911 Addition; and the addition of a lean-to awning attached to the north elevation (rear) of the 1909 Building.

B. Historic Context:

Historic Power Plant Complex

The first portion (the Original Building) of the Historic Power Plant Complex, constructed in 1909, was among the numerous buildings constructed at the County Poor Farm during the first decade of the twentieth century. A one-story brick building displaying the utilitarian brick vernacular typical

³ McAvoy, Christy J., Historic Resources Group. 26 July 1995. *Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center, Primary Record and District Record*. Los Angeles, CA.

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of commercial and industrial architecture of the time, the Original Building (or powerhouse) comprises the east wing of the Complex. Two years later, in 1911, a one-story addition in the same Brick Vernacular style was constructed west of the original powerhouse. The addition housed the campus laundry. A freestanding water tower was erected north of the building in 1913; the tower and tank are of steel construction and have a capacity of 100,000 gallons.

The County Poor Farm continued to expand, with new buildings that marked a shift in its mission from poor farm to hospital, during the 1910s and 1920s. By 1925 additional power generation capabilities were needed, and a new, larger power plant was built to accommodate expected growth over the next quarter century. Two-stories in height, with monumental Classical Revival detailing, the new building was attached to the east end of the 1909-1911 Original Building, which then was converted into an ice house and machine shop. The freestanding Chimney, located next to the Water Tower, was built concurrently with the new power plant. Sometime between 1933 and 1936, a large wooden Water Cooling Tower was built on the roof of the ice house.

PART II. ARCHITECTURE INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. **Architectural character:** The Historic Power Plant Complex is an assemblage of cubic volumes that loosely define an L-shaped plan. The 1909 Original Building and 1911 Addition, both one-story in height and designed in the Brick Vernacular style, comprise the longer leg of the "L." The 1925 Power Plant building, the equivalent of two stories in height and designed in the Classical Revival style, forms the shorter leg. The character-defining features of the Original Building and 1911 Addition include its asymmetrical, unornamented character, brick exterior walls, flat roofs, and simple horizontal belt courses and bands of corbelled bricks that wrap around the exterior elevations above the windows, defining the frieze and parapet. The character-defining features of the 1925 Power Plant include its symmetrical north, south, and east elevations, the temple-like treatment of the three central bays on the east elevation, continuous cornice that horizontally trims each wall below the roof parapet and above a plain plaster frieze and architrave, and a triangular pediment above the cornice, supported by four projecting pilasters that frame the three center bays.
2. **Condition of fabric:** The current condition of the Historic Power Plant Complex is poor. Left vacant since the 1990s, its three building components have deteriorated from earthquakes, neglect, and exposure resulting in its current state of disrepair. The masonry and mortar of the exterior brick walls of the Complex has eroded, especially in the lower courses. Stair-stepped diagonal cracking appears in almost all segments of the walls, as well as bed joint cracking.

Dislodgement and falling of units has occurred, and there is no doweling or direct mechanism of force transfer between the walls and the foundation.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. **Overall dimensions:** The Complex is “L-shaped” in plan and stands one and two stories. The overall dimensions for the Complex by building are as follows:
 - a. **1909 Original Building with 1911 Addition (Shop, Laundry, and Ice Plant):** The building’s footprint measures 141’ wide by 108’ in height. The net interior condition space, interior dimensions exclusive of covered or enclosed exterior spaces, for the Shop, Laundry, and Ice Plant calculates to 1,592 square feet. The building has an enclosed condition space, including exterior dimensions and covered or enclosed spaces of 12,738 square feet.
 - b. **1925 Power Plant:** The building is rectangular in plan and stands 42.4’ in height. The exterior building measurements are 185’-6” inches wide by 56’ deep. The interior condition space for the Power Plant calculates to 10,023 square feet. The building has an enclosed condition space, including covered spaces of 10,175 square feet. The projecting chimney is approximately 124’ in height.
2. **Foundations:** Concrete makes up the foundations of the three buildings of the Historic Power Plant Complex.
3. **Walls:** The consistent use of brick throughout the Complex is a significant contributor to the overall character of the Complex. The 1925 Power Plant building is defined by unreinforced masonry walls in common bond pattern. The plastered finish of the cornice, pediment and stepped parapets, and pilasters is also a character-defining material of the building. The 1909 Original Building and the 1911 Addition also are defined by painted unreinforced masonry walls, in common bond pattern. Historic black-and-white photographs suggest that these exterior walls were originally unpainted.

The principal trim features exhibited on the Complex exterior walls are the Tuscan bases and capitals of the pilasters, the entablature, and the cornice of the 1925 Power Plant building; the corbelled brick courses that define the frieze and parapet of the 1909 Original Building and the 1911 Addition; and the various window trimmings. The 1925 Power Plant building is characterized by simple projecting concrete window sills that trim the large windows on every elevation. The 1909 Original Building and 1911 Addition of the Complex are characterized by segmental arched lintels that adorn the majority of the windows. Each window is defined by a triple course of header bricks that line the arch and is capped with a sill composed of a row of header bricks. There are also four less distinctive windows featured on the east and west elevations of the 1911 Addition; these are rectangular windows of varying sizes that lack the ornamental segmental arch and

the brick sill. The lack of other architectural ornamentation is indicative of the utilitarian purpose of the Complex.

4. **Structural system, framing:** The structural system for the 1909 Original Building and 1911 Addition consists of a wooden roof supported by unreinforced brick masonry walls. The buildings have a roof diaphragm, shear walls, and concrete foundation.

The structural system of the 1925 Power Plant Building consists of unreinforced brick masonry walls in which the gravity roof loads are supported mainly by a system of trusses and steel columns encased in the masonry assembly.

5. **Chimneys:** A freestanding chimney is visible on the north elevation of the Complex and was constructed concurrently with the 1925 Power Plant. The cylindrical chimney is composed of concrete reinforced steel beams and stands 140 feet in height. The chimney contains a wider base that telescopes smaller toward the top of the structure to provide stability. Vertical fluting characterizes the exterior.
6. **Openings:** Openings on the 1909 Original Building are reflective of the building's utilitarian industrial vernacular style. There are no exterior openings featured on the west or east elevations of the 1909 Original Building, due to the additions of the 1911 laundry building and the 1925 Power Plant building, respectively. Asymmetrically organized windows and doors are scattered on the remaining elevations. The north elevation contains six wood-framed six-over-six-light double-hung sash windows and two double doors that are capped by a three-over-three-light transom. The southern elevation contains three wood-framed six-over-six-light double-hung sash windows and a double-hung sash window and a double door, capped by a three-over-three-light transom. The windows are flat-headed but set into segmental arch openings created by three courses of header bricks. Single courses of slightly projecting header bricks form the sills.

Openings on the 1911 Addition also repeat the proportions, configuration, detailing, and asymmetrical placement of the 1909 Original Building. The northern end of the west elevation is generally characterized by a pair of tall wood-framed windows, a door opening covered with wood, and four small, unevenly sized windows. The northernmost window consists of a tall window opening that contains a three-over-three-light wood-framed window at the top, while the remaining portion of the opening is covered over with wood. A second tall window hangs to the south; it contains a six-over-six-light wood-framed sash double-hung window. A single door opening covered in wood boards hangs adjacent to the two tall windows. The door is topped with a wood-framed multilight transom. To the south of the door, there are four small windows of slightly varying size, hung in pairs. The northern pair contains uneven one-over-three-light wood-framed sash windows. The remaining pair contains one small aperture that is lacking a window

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and a small one-over-one wood-framed sash window. The southern end of the western elevation contains four tall, six-over-six-light wood-framed double-hung sash windows, hung in pairs.

The south elevation of the 1911 Addition also features asymmetrical fenestration. The west end contains six-over-six-light wood-framed double-hung sash windows. To the east of the windows there is a wood door capped by a wood-framed transom composed of a pair of one-over-three-light windows. A six-over-six-light wood-framed double-hung sash window hangs between the wood door and a wide, roll-up metal bay door. A solid lintel, painted now but visible in early photographs, tops this larger opening. Four six-over-six-light wood-framed double-hung sash windows hang across the remainder of the south elevation.

Although partially adjoined by the 1909 Original Building, the east elevation of the 1911 Addition contains five window openings, each of varying width and shape, with wood-framed multilight windows. These windows are concealed from street view and are less of a contributing feature of the Complex.

Windows provide scale and bring visual interest to the composition of the 1925 Power Plant elevations. The fenestration generally may be characterized as large, extending to nearly the full height of the elevation, symmetrically arranged, steel-framed, multilight industrial sash set in a linear configuration that provides a continuous rhythm across the building.

Openings on the east-facing façade of the 1925 Power Plant building are arranged in a distinctive, symmetrical pattern. The elevation is organized into 13 equally sized bays. The center bay is pierced by a large double door and capped with a tall rectangular multilight window. The remaining 12 bays each contain a double-height rectangular aperture composed of metal-framed multilight windows with slightly projecting concrete sills. The focal point of the elevation is a Tuscan-order temple front that defines the three center bays. Four raised pilasters with capitals support an entablature consisting of the frieze and cornice that wrap the principal elevations and by the triangle pediment. The face of the pediment, as that of the parapets, is plastered; it has been incised with the date of the building: "1925."

The south elevation of the 1925 Power Plant building is organized into three bays: the center bay is slightly recessed and contains a double-door opening topped by large, multilight transom window and flanked by sidelights. The symmetrical end bays are occupied by large, double-height rectangular windows similar to those on the east elevation. The symmetrical composition and fenestration is repeated on the north elevation without the sidelights featured in the south elevation center bay.

The west elevation of the 1925 Power Plant Building is partially adjoined by the 1909 Original Building, leaving less of a surface for window openings. The only

openings on the elevation are four large, steel-framed multilight windows that appear at the northern end of the wing and an additional window set high up at the south end of the wing. Large double doors comprise the lower half of the openings for the first and third windows from the north. This elevation is concealed from street view and lacks the symmetry found on the south and east elevations.

8. Roof:

- a. **1909 Original Building and 1911 Addition:** The 1909 Original Building is topped by a wooden Water Cooling Tower with distinctive flared tiers that rests on the nearly flat roof of the building. The wooden Water Cooling Tower was added to the roof sometime between 1933 and 1936. Two hipped ridge skylights composed of steel-framed lights rest on the eastern portion of the roof. Plain parapets shield the roof from view from the street. A similarly almost flat roof ringed by a low parapet tops the 1911 Addition. At the southern end of the wing, a hipped ridge skylight sits atop a continuous band of six-light sash.
- b. **1925 Power Plant Building:** The 1925 Power Plant Building is surmounted by a flat roof surrounded by low parapet walls on all four elevations of the building. Stepped parapets are centered above the symmetrically arranged north and south elevations and shape the distinctive profile of the building. Sandwiched between the stepped parapets, a rectangular-massed monitor roof wrapped in a continuous band of steel-framed multilight windows runs the length of the building. On the east, a triangular pediment rises above the central three bays, forming the top piece of a composition derived from Classical temple design.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. **1909 Original Building:** One-story with the overall feeling of a small space, largely due to the wood truss which defines the ceiling height. The wooden ceiling trusses in the 1909 Original Building are supported by freestanding steel pipe columns. Partition walls separate office space from industrial workspace throughout the wing.

The overall plan of the room is asymmetrical, a result of the 1911 and 1925 additions that obstruct portions of the east, south, and west elevations.

- b. **1911 Addition:** One-story consisting of one large interior space, with a rectangular plan, and smaller, support spaces along the north wall.

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- c. **1925 Power Plant Building:** Two-story height, defined by two large open rooms that command the interior space. The Engine Room occupies the southern portion of the wing, while the large Boiler Room occupies the northern. The immense height of the rooms and overall open-floor interior plan contribute to the visual character of the building.
 - 2. **Stairways:** A steel staircase is present on the west elevation of the Engine Room of the 1925 Power Plant Building that provides access to a steel platform. The staircase consists of open risers and a steel metal pipe handrail.
 - 3. **Flooring:** Concrete floors are present in all three building components of the Complex.
 - 4. **Mechanical equipment:**
 - a. **Steel Pipes:** Exposed steel pipes weave between the floor and ceiling throughout the 1925 Power Plant Building.
 - b. **Steel Platform:** The steel platform located at the top of a steel staircase on the west elevation of the Engine Room of the 1925 Power Plant Building supports additional piping and associated equipment. Below it, the original sliding steel door to a small transformer room is in situ.
- D. **Site:**
- 1. **General setting:** The setting of the Complex as it exists today reflects the post-1925 era when the County Poor Farm was transitioning into a medical facility for chronically ill patients. It consists of landscaping along the Erickson Avenue frontage and an urban lack of setbacks on the south and west elevations. Streets and concrete sidewalks surround the Complex. The once prominent intersection of Erickson and Consuelo (a half block to the south) has been degraded by intrusions such as parking and the removal of formal street trees.
 - 2. **Orientation:** The design of the 1925 Power Plant building dictates the orientation of the power plant, whose primary elevations face east and south and, to a lesser degree, north. The majority of architectural detail is concentrated on these facades. In addition, the role of Ericson Avenue as the primary north-south axis of the South Campus confers additional prominence to the east elevation. Similarly, the street-facing elevations of the 1909 Original Building and 1911 Addition (the western sections of the south elevation along Descanso Street) and the west elevation on Hawthorn Street are significant in that they face the street and are relatively intact, but they have less architectural detail and are visually less prominent.

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As the only nonpublic elevations, the exterior walls facing the large mechanical courtyard are of lesser importance, although the Classical Revival design that characterizes the 1925 Power Plant building does wrap onto the north end of the west elevation.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings:

The earliest known drawings of the building were commissioned in 1909 by the City of Downey as part of their first City electric plant initiative; however these could not be uncovered by research. A copy of the 1925 drawings created by the County of Los Angeles Mechanical Department for the Power Plant Building were located at the County of Los Angeles and a copy has been attached as field notes with this report. A set of as-found drawings were prepared for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation in 2007 by Diamond West Engineering, Inc. for the County of Los Angeles.

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E. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

None

F. Supplemental Material:

Historical photographs
Reduced copies of original architectural drawings
Reduced copies of 2007 as-found drawings
Aerial map

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

HABS documentation for the Historic Power Plant Complex was prepared by Sapphos Environmental, Inc. staff from December 2006 to September 2009 on behalf of the County of Los Angeles Chief Executive Office (CEO). The HABS documentation serves as mitigation to comply with the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the proposed County Data Center project. Measured surveys and the creation of as-found drawings were carried out in 2007 by Ms. Wanda Ostermann of Diamond West Engineering, Inc., Los Angeles, California. Photographs were taken in from July 2007 to July 2008 by Mr. David Lee, production manager, and Mr. Clarus Backes, senior resources specialist, Sapphos Environmental, Inc. Part I of the historical report (historic context) was prepared by Ms. Shannon Carmack, senior resources coordinator, Ms. Rebecca Silva, senior resources coordinator, Ms. Deborah Howell-Ardila, senior resources coordinator, and Ms. Laura Carias, cultural resources analyst, Sapphos Environmental, Inc. Part II of the historical report (architectural information) was prepared by Ms. Rebecca Silva, senior resources coordinator, Sapphos Environmental, Inc. Ms. Leslie Heumann, Sapphos Environmental, Inc. manager of cultural resources, reviewed the final report and supporting documents, and provided research, writing, and project oversight.